

# Japanese Honeysuckle



## Background, Life History

Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) is a perennial semi-evergreen vine native to Japan. First introduced in 1806 as an ornamental ground cover, it slowly escaped cultivation and became widely established by the early 1900s. It is an aggressive, invasive vine readily colonizing new habitats. Although it prefers sunny locations it can tolerate some shading. Communities at particular risk are prairies, savannas, glades and woodlands. However, it can invade upland and bottomland forest where natural openings are present that allow enough light for growth. Birds are attracted to the fruits and distribute the seed along fences, into fields and open natural communities. New vines also develop from underground rhizomes and vegetative runners that can sprout where the nodes (stem and leaf junctions) contact the soil. Severe winter temperatures and low precipitation may limit its distribution in more northern latitudes.

Japanese honeysuckle spreads along the ground, forming dense mats and climbs shrubs and trees, often dominating tree canopies. Young stems are brownish-red and usually have soft, fine hairs, while older stems are woody with bark that peels in long strips. Opposite, oval leaves grow up to 3 inches long and remain on the vine until mid-winter. Fragrant white flowers turn yellow with age and occur in pairs at the leaf axil (where the leaf attaches to the stem). Petals are fused, forming a tubular flower. Flowers bloom from May through June; developing small, purplish-black fruits containing 2 to 3 seeds that persist into late winter.



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## Impacts

The prolific growth of Japanese honeysuckle covers and shades out existing native ground cover vegetation, as well as shrubs and trees. It can significantly alter or destroy the natural communities it invades including prairies, glades, savannas, woodlands, floodplains and upland forests. Within the forest communities, bird populations may be impacted by the loss of native understory vegetation.



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*Opposite, oval leaves and tubular white to yellow flowers at the leaf axils help to identify Japanese honeysuckle.*

*Purplish-black fruits persist into winter and are attractive to birds, which then disperse the seeds into fencerows, disturbed areas and natural communities.*

*Japanese honeysuckle forms dense mats of plants that smother existing vegetation on the ground and into the tree canopy.*

## Control

Individual young vines can be pulled up by the roots and removed from sparsely populated areas. This method requires that the entire plant, including all roots, runners, and seed be removed to avoid re-sprouting.

In areas of heavy infestation, vines can be cut by hand, and each cut stem sprayed with triclopyr in oil, glyphosate, imazapyr or picloram + 2,4-D. Cut stump treatment is best applied after the last killing frost and prior to spring wildflower emergence to prevent harm to non-target species.

Foliar herbicides are often the most efficient means of control in areas with extensive growth and to treat re-sprouting cut stems. Foliar application is effective from mid-summer into fall, following shoot elongation. With leaves remaining green after surrounding vegetation has become dormant, herbicides can be applied in late fall to minimize harm to native vegetation. Effective herbicides include glyphosate, triclopyr, triclopyr + 2,4D, imazapyr and metsulfuron.

Spring prescribed burns can kill germinating seedlings and young plants, as well as suppress above ground growth of established plants, depending on fire intensity. After burning, established plants will quickly re-sprout or re-root making it necessary to follow up with herbicide treatments.

## Native Look-alikes

Native honeysuckles (*Lonicera* spp.) develop red or orange berries and flowers at the tip of the stem, with leaves that are fused around the stem. Japanese honeysuckle is readily distinguished by its purplish-black fruits, flowers at the leaf axils, and leaves that do not unite around the stem.

## Identifying Japanese Honeysuckle

- Semi-evergreen vine sprawling along ground or climbing trees and shrubs
- Opposite, oval, glossy leaves less than 3 inches in length that remain green into late winter
- Large, fragrant, tubular, white flowers, turning yellow with age
- Small purplish-black fruits persisting on vine into winter

## Alternative Native Plants

Yellow honeysuckle (*Lonicera flava*)

American bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*)

Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*)

## For Additional Information

[invasive.org/browse/subinfo.cfm?sub=3039](http://invasive.org/browse/subinfo.cfm?sub=3039)

[invasivespeciesinfo.gov/plants/honeysuckle.shtml](http://invasivespeciesinfo.gov/plants/honeysuckle.shtml)

**mdc.mo.gov**

For more information or to report a population, contact your local Missouri Department of Conservation office, e-mail **WildlifeDivision@mdc.mo.gov**, or write:

**Japanese Honeysuckle**  
**Missouri Department of Conservation**  
**Invasive Species Coordinator**  
**PO Box 180**  
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